



## The Impact of the Native Speaker Ideal on Learners' Motivation in an EFL Context

Patricia Paola Araíz-Carrillo

*University of Guanajuato, Guanajuato, MEXICO*  
*Division of Social Sciences and Humanities*

Received: 7 November 2022 ▪ Revised: 21 December 2022 ▪ Accepted: 27 December 2022

### *Abstract*

In the present time, English is widely used as the common language for global interaction. In other words, English is used by both native and non-native speakers of the language to communicate with a variety of individuals with different backgrounds, cultures, and first languages. Nevertheless, in language education, the native speaker ideal is still the model of reference for performance. This case study was concerned with examining the effects and influence of the native speaker ideal on students' motivation in Central Mexico. The participants for this study consisted of 6 female college students. They were enrolled in English classes at the University of Guanajuato as part of their undergraduate program at the time of the study. An interview of 10 base questions was designed to gather data. The results conclude that the native speaker ideal usually has a negative influence on students' motivation. For this reason, it would be valuable to approach English as an international language instead.

*Keywords:* native-speaker, motivation, English as an international language.

### 1. Introduction

English is, in the present time, the language used by individuals to communicate with people from different countries with varied cultural backgrounds, cultural practices, and languages. This widespread use of English increases the possibility of the development of more English varieties that differ, to varying degrees, from standard or native speaker norms. For this reason, certain researchers have categorized it as an international language (McKay, 2002; Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Smith, 1976). However, in most EFL contexts, such as Mexico, the native speaker ideal is still predominant in language teaching. According to Leung (2005), "the 'idealized curriculum for L2 learning' was often built on the perspective of an imagined or idealized native speaker of English" (p. 127). Teachers and students thus have adopted it as a model of reference for learning and competence in the language.

This phenomenon in ELT is extremely contradictory considering that it is estimated that there are approximately 500-1000 million people who use English for a variety of reasons and for whom English is neither their native language (Crystal, 2003). The native speaker ideal, according to some L2 motivation models, pose significant implications on students' motivation. The following paper aims to explore the influence of the native speaker ideal on learners' motivation in an EFL context. Therefore, I will first define the concepts of native speaker and its prevalence in language teaching, L2 motivation, and English as an International Language.

Second, I will present the data and results of the present study to finally provide a conclusion on the topic.

## 2. Literature review

In this following section, I provide definitions and explain in detail concepts such as the native speaker, motivation, and English as an international language.

### 2.1 *Native speaker*

The notion of the “*native speaker*” has been widely researched as well as questioned for its implications on language education (Andreou & Galantomos, 2009; Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Lowe, 2020). Andreou and Galantomos (2009) point out that a native speaker is someone born in a country in which the target language is spoken; thus, it becomes their first language. Additionally, Stern (1983) claims that a native speaker is a person that possesses a subconscious knowledge of linguistic rules (i.e., grammatical, phonological, among others), an innate grasp of meaning, the ability to communicate in various social settings using a wide range of language skills and creativity.

The native-speaker is thus commonly considered the ideal or the point of reference for models of acquisition and competence in linguistics. For instance, Davies (2003) explains that, in Chomsky’s works, the native speaker tends to be regarded as “the arbiter of a grammar, and (when idealized) as somehow being the model for the grammar” (p. 5). This native speaker ideal thus maintains its prevalence as a marker of proficiency in language education and SLA research in several EFL contexts. Because of this, individuals subject and compare themselves and their linguistic competence to one of a native speaker.

Indeed, students and teachers are constantly bombarded with and encouraged to accept the “language competence, learning styles, communication patterns, conversational maxims, cultural beliefs, and even accent as the norm” (Kumaravadivelu, 2012: 18) of native speakers. Kumaravadivelu refers to this as the ‘native speaker episteme.’ It is an episteme because the native speaker ideology has shaped the way we teach, assess, understand, learn, and represent English in a global scale.

This assumption of teaching and learning English just to achieve “native speaker competence” is a problematic one. English learners should not be simply encouraged to speak and behave in the same way native speakers do to use the language. Otherwise, this constant comparison can have major implications on their motivation for the learning process and perceptions of the language. For instance, Kramsch (1998) states that “methodologies based on the native speaker usually define language learners in terms of what they are not, or at least not yet” (p. 28). This fails to consider students’ own goals regarding the language and their own preferences.

According to research conducted on learner preferences, the number of students that support native speaker’s norms in countries belonging to outer and expanding circles (Kachru, 1985) has decreased notoriously (Subtirelu, 2013). He and Zhang (2010) found that native speaker’s norms received less support from Chinese university students than intelligibility-based standards. Therefore, the native speaker ideal does not align with learners’ preferences and beliefs most of the time. However, most native speaker’s norms remain and prevail on an institutionalized level and Mexico is not the exception (Moore, 2017). Despite what learners prefer, the native speaker ideal has been deeply ingrained into the minds of these learners in EFL contexts. For this reason, it is valuable to explore what impact this notion can have on their L2 learning motivation.

## 2.2 *Motivation*

In general terms, motivation refers to the direction and magnitude of human behavior, including the choice of a specific action, the persistence of the individual in regards of such action and the effort invested on it (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). Motivation is then responsible for the reason behind the start of a specific activity and the time and energy expended on it to achieve a particular goal. Students' objectives for learning a language can be different from those devised by institutions or teachers. However, an institution's objective can still have an impact on the students and their motivation.

L2 motivation research has progressed through many stages over the years, with scholars conceptualizing numerous L2 motivation models in the area, beginning with Gardner's socio-educational model (Lai, 2013). This model assumes that motivation is inherently related to integrative and instrumental orientation. According to Gardner (2001), motivation involves three different components: effort, positive affect, and desire. These three components embody the learner's amount of effort dedicated to a task, the desire to achieve certain goals and the enjoyment of the learning process itself.

However, this model has received several critiques from other researchers due to its ambiguity and confusing definitions of the dimensions found in it, namely, the integrative aspect of motivation (Lai, 2013). On one hand, integrativeness refers to the ability and interest an individual has to learn the target language to get closer to the community. On the other hand, it includes the "complete identification with the community (and possibly even withdrawal from one's original group)" (Gardner, 2001: 1). Although Gardner later attempted to clarify and redefine the aspect of integrative motivation, other researchers developed new models of L2 motivation to address this and other issues.

Drawing on existing L2 motivation models, Dörnyei (2009) proposed the L2 Motivational Self System. In it, Dörnyei redefined L2 learning motivation as an L2 learner's desire to lessen the perceived disparity between their real self and their prospective L2-using selves: the Ideal L2 Self and the Ought-to L2 Self (Zheng, 2013). This author explains that the Ideal L2 Self refers to the individual's self-image that expresses their desire to become a competent L2 speaker and their vision for the future. Thus, it is intrinsic to the individual. The Ought-to L2 Self, on the other hand, refers to the characteristics that the person believes one should possess to meet expectations while avoiding potentially undesirable results. It symbolizes someone else's vision for the individual and can thus be considered as an external force (Dörnyei, 2009).

Additionally, this model has a third component known as L2 learning experience, "which concerns situated and executive motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience" (Zheng, 2013: 346). Dörnyei's L2 Self System has provided L2 motivation researchers with a new and comprehensive perspective from which to approach or reconceptualize L2 motivation (Lai, 2013) to take into account other sociocultural and educational contexts.

## 2.3 *English as an international language*

As it was mentioned before, English has become the language in common for international communication. In other words, English will be used to communicate both locally and globally and to interact with a wide range of individuals. This extensive use of English has cataloged it as an international language.

For a language to be categorized as an international language, "it cannot be linked to any one country or culture; rather it must belong to those who use it" (McKay, 2002: 1). Therefore, if English is deemed an international language, then it is void of a particular culture or country that is normally associated with the language (e.g., The United States, the United Kingdom,

Australia, and other countries belonging to the Inner Circle). That is to say that English does not belong only to a native speaking community, but it belongs to those who use the language regardless of it.

Within an EIL framework, two fundamental shifts have occurred that are worth considering. The first one establishes that the purpose for learning the language has changed (Moore, 2017). Decades ago, it was believed that the main purpose for learning English was to participate and interact merely with native speaking communities, as Gardner proposed on his socio-educational model. Currently, however, learners expect to interact and participate in different communities by using English as the common language. The second shift concerns the understanding of “appropriate language forms” (Moore, 2017). This implies that multiple varieties of English are now validated in most contexts.

English as an International Language also recognizes that considering language as a “stand-alone product” (Canagarajah, 2013: 7) alters the way meaning is co-created in conversation (Moore, 2017). As a result, the idea that we can identify and characterize a single “standard” version of English is regarded as questionable. It is preferable to think of language as an organic and dynamic system capable of changing and adapting to its surroundings (Galloway & Rose, 2015). However, adapting an EIL framework represents numerous challenges, especially in EFL contexts. These include a preference for ‘standard’ English and other native speakers’ norms. In this regard, Mexico is no exception (Moore, 2017).

### 3. Methodology

This section will introduce the research design of the study, including the research questions, participants, method, and data collection techniques.

#### 3.1 *Research questions*

The present study aimed to inquire on the effect of the native-speaker ideal on the motivation of English students. Therefore, the following research question was developed:

- How does the native-speaker ideal impact learners' motivation in an EFL context in Central Mexico?

#### 3.2 *Participants*

Participants in this research included six female college students. Of these participants, three were seniors while the other three were sophomores from different degrees. Their ages ranged from 19 to 27 years old and were from similar family and educational backgrounds. At the time of the study, participants were enrolled in English classes in the University of Guanajuato as part of their undergraduate program. They all possess an upper-intermediate level of English. They were recruited through personal connections.

#### 3.3 *Qualitative approach*

Qualitative research is considerable suitable for providing insights into social, cultural, and situational factors that influence practically every element of language acquisition and use (Dörnyei, 2007). Since this study is concerned with the impact and influence of the native-speaker ideal on EFL students' motivation, the qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate paradigm to use as a point of reference to develop the research.

The qualitative approach, also known as qualitative paradigm, refers to “research that is based on descriptive data that does not make (regular) use of statistical procedures” (Mckay & Gass, 2005: 162). According to Riazi (2016), the underlying paradigms for qualitative research are *interpretivism* and *social constructivism*. In other words, it aims to gather and collect ample and substantial data. This is possible by collecting data that demonstrates the diverse ways the participants and the researcher can interpret the same event or phenomenon.

### 3.4 Case study

This study implemented a single-case study methodology to generate and gather context-sensitive data to address and answer the research question mentioned before (Duff, 2008; Zheng, 2013). A case study is “the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon” (Gall et al., 2003: 436). In applied linguistics, as Duff (2008) affirms, “the study of individuals and their attributes, knowledge, development, and performance has always been a very important component of applied linguistics research, particularly in SLA” (p. 35). The case of this study, therefore, is the language learners and their motivation as influenced by native-speaker standards.

### 3.5 Data collection techniques: Interview

Qualitative interviews are a common data collection technique in applied linguistics. They allow researchers to “probe participant responses by offering alternative question forms, asking for clarifications, and, depending on the interview, co-constructing knowledge produced in the interaction” (Rose et al., 2020: 114). Because of this, interviews are suitable for inquiring into experiences, beliefs, perceptions, identities, and attitudes, which can be considered difficult to obtain by using other types of methods.

The data in the present study was collected through the use of qualitative interviews with the participants. Each interview was done individually, in English, with each of the participants through the online conferencing platform known as Zoom. The interviews were recorded to be later transcribed for analysis. Because qualitative interviews enable researchers to gain a more in-depth knowledge of the participants' experiences, beliefs, and perceptions, I conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the impact and prevalence of the native-speaker ideal in ELT in Central Mexico.

Semi-structured interviews, as stated by Rose et al. (2020), allow “for new ideas to form within a predetermined framework of themes” (p. 116). They provide more opportunities for interpretation and reflection from the researcher and the participants. This type of interviews are commonly designed by carefully identifying the main themes that the researcher wishes to explore to then ask follow-up questions to elaborate on interesting and relevant aspects of the participants' responses.

## 4. Analysis and discussion of results

### 4.1 Students' perceptions of native speakers' norms

The interview data shows that the participants hold contrasting opinions on native speakers and the norms based on them. While some of them harbor what could be described as positive or favorable perceptions, the contrary occurs for the rest of them. For instance, intermediate student Lucía believes that:

They speak so beautiful, and their accent is too beautiful too. I would like to speak like them and I think that they have the privilege that they don't have to learn another language because all is translated in their language. (Lucía)

Other participants in the study share the same opinions and sentiments as Lucía. According to Llurda (2009), attitudes toward a language are influenced by a variety of factors, including the learner's native language and attendance to language lessons. It can then be argued that students with more sympathetic opinions and attitudes toward native speakers may be due to their positive experiences involving them. However, this implies that students could develop the opposite viewpoints. As the student Alexa mentions:

As with any other person, I don't really feel any admiration towards them just because they are native speakers of English. They don't know it all just by being native speakers. They can make the same number of mistakes as we do but they still expect us to use the language like they do and I think we already do. (Alexa)

This participant suggests that being a native speaker does not exclude an individual from making errors or mistakes. It demonstrates that students are aware of the discrepancies between the native speaker as an ideal, an idealized notion, and the reality. Similarly, the participant Lydia states that:

From time to time, they don't follow the grammar rules, they also are more confident when talking in English. (Lydia)

For this reason, it is important to remark that individuals are flawed and prone to make mistakes while using the language, even native speakers. The difference, however, is that by idealizing native speakers, certain western cultures, models, and speakers of English tend to be privileged over others (Lowe, 2020). It is because of this that the native speaker ideal remains prevalent in numerous EFL contexts, which can affect students' motivation in different ways.

For instance, taking into account Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational L2 System, the Ought-to L2 Self is shaped by other's expectations towards the individual. Therefore, if the expectations are mainly based on the native speaker ideal, students can internalize these norms even if they do not completely align with their initial Ideal L2 Self vision as language learners.

#### *4.2 Effects on students' motivation and language use*

As mentioned before, the pervasiveness of the native speaker ideal in non-native ELT contexts influence students' motivation levels differently. On one hand, as shown in the data of the interviews, this influence is rather positive. Students suggest that having a specific model of reference allow them to establish clearer objectives. As exemplified by Lucía:

They made me want to keep learning and be better in the language. So, I think they are good ones, because they improve my motivation to keep a conversation with others in this language too. (Lucía)

During the interview with this same participant, Lucía mentioned that she was often complimented by native and non-native speakers for her accent whenever she spoke English. Therefore, the influence on her motivation was positive instead of negative. Zheng (2013) points out that "if the learner failed to conform to NS norms ingrained in examination requirements and teacher preferences, they might face the negative outcomes that they needed to avoid" (p. 350) which decreased their motivation. It can be assumed that the opposite can occur as well, as demonstrated by the previous excerpt. An example of negative influence was provided by the following participants:

It had a direct impact in my speaking skills mostly. Because my accent is influenced by Americans. (Natalia)

Sometimes I would prefer to learn another language before learn English for bad experiences, and because I really hate the USA culture, a lot of their people, and a lot of discrimination in general, but I really know that English is an important language in the world and sooner or later I will have to learn it. (Vero)

They expect each of us speak like a native and expect that we adopt the accents of Americans or British speakers and it makes me feel pressured. (Nadia)

It made me insecure about the way I speak and because of this I didn't practice it. (Lydia)

It is interesting but not surprising to note the emphasis placed on accent and speaking abilities by these students. As Timmis (2002) states, “accent, in many ways, seems to go to the heart of the native-speaker issue” (p. 241). It is often that teachers, schools, and administrators promote the native speaker ideal when it comes to pronunciation. Because of this, it is comprehensible that language learners perceive native speaker’s pronunciation and accent as a benchmark of appropriate use of the language.

#### *4.3 Implications on English language teaching*

The last questions of the interview were devoted to the discussion of possible and implications and suggestions to ameliorate the influence of the native speaker ideal in language teaching. Participants provided numerous and valuable ideas such as:

Teachers must consider that we’re learning a different language from our own. And both languages are totally different with different phonetics and vocabulary. They must consider that because we live in Mexico we don’t use the language frequently, ‘cause not many people speak it. (Alexa)

Make students aware of the different accents that exist and that is not that important to speak like a native, what is important is that they are able to communicate with other people. (Nadia)

By helping the students realize there is more than one accent and different ways in which the language is spoken and used within a region, I think that can help to open their eyes and make them more critical. (Natalia)

These excerpts suggest that students are aware of the different varieties of English around the world and the importance of acknowledging in the language classroom. This is important because, if we want to move away from focusing on teaching ‘native-speaker competence’ we require “an epistemic break from its dependency on Western-oriented or, more specifically, Center-based (aka Inner Circle-based) knowledge systems” (Kumaravadivelu, 2012: 9). An epistemic break “represents a thorough re-conceptualization and a thorough re-organization of knowledge systems” (Kumaravadivelu, 2012: 14). As participants suggested, the first step to accomplish this is to recognize the limitations and implications of perpetuating native speaker norms and ideals in the language learning process. Therefore, as McKay (2003) observes, there are sound pedagogical and practical reasons to pay attention to the existence of different varieties of English as a key curriculum and classroom teaching.

## 5. Conclusions

The findings of this study conclude that the native speaker ideal has several imposing implications in students’ motivation. Most of the participants suggested that the pervasiveness of native speaker models negatively influences their motivation and even their own perceptions and attitudes toward the language and its users. Consequently, students were able to provide solutions

to this issue that educators may benefit from taking into account. Furthermore, these results are consistent with the findings of other studies mentioned beforehand throughout this paper.

In conclusion, English as an international language can be incredibly valuable for language teaching and learning, because it is not tied to any particular culture or social context. Therefore, we should abandon the native speaker ideology because it does not reflect how English is used and by whom it is used today. The reality is that there are more non-native speakers of English than native speakers. However, this standard remains and continues to actively influence both teaching and learning, and this should change.

#### Acknowledgements

I offer my thanks to Prof. Debbie Saavedra for her support and feedback on this study.

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

#### References

- Andreou, C., & Galantomos, I. (2009). The native speaker ideal in foreign language teaching. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 6(2), 200-208.
- Canagarajah, S. (2013). *Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. Routledge.
- Crystal, D. (2003) *English as a global language* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, A. (2003). *The native speaker: Myth and reality* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Multilingual Matters.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2009). The L2 motivational self system. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 9-42). Multilingual Matters.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Skehan, P. (2003). Individual differences in second language learning. In C. J. Doughty & M. H. Long (Eds.), *The handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 589-630). Blackwell Publishing.
- Duff, P. A. (2008). *Case study research in applied linguistics*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. T. (2003). *Educational research* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Pearson Education.
- Galloway, N., & Rose, H. (2015). *Introducing global Englishes*. Routledge.
- Gardner, R. C. (2001). Integrative motivation and second language acquisition. In Z. Dörnyei & R. Schmidt (Eds.), *Motivation and second language acquisition* (pp. 1-19). University of Hawaii Press.
- He, D., & Zhang, Q. (2010). Native speaker norms and China English: From the perspective of learners and teachers in China. *TESOL Quarterly*, 44(4), 769-789.  
<https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2010.235995>
- Kachru, B. B. (1985) Standard, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk & H. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literatures* (pp. 11-30). Cambridge University Press.
- Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and culture*. Oxford University Press.



- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2012). Individual identity, cultural globalization, and teaching English as an international language: The case for an epistemic break. In L. Alsagoff, S. L. McKay, G. Hu & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Principles and practices for teaching English as an international language* (pp. 11-27). Routledge.
- Lai, H. Y. T. (2013). The motivation of learners of English as a foreign language revisited. *International Education Studies*, 6(10), 90-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ies.v6n10p90>
- Leung, C. (2005). Convivial communication: Recontextualizing communicative competence. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 15(2), 119-144. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1473-4192.2005.00084.x>
- Llurda, E. (2009). Attitudes towards English as an international language: The pervasiveness of native models among L2 users and teachers. In F. Sharifian (Ed.), *English as an international language: Perspectives and pedagogical issues* (pp. 119-134). Multilingual Matters.
- Lowe, R. J. (2020). *Uncovering ideology in English language teaching: Identifying the 'native speaker' frame*. Springer.
- McKay, S. L. (2002). *Teaching English as an international language*. Oxford University Press.
- McKay, S. L. (2003). Toward an appropriate EIL pedagogy: Re-examining common ELT assumptions. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 13, 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1473-4192.00035>
- Mckay, A., & Gass, S. M. (2005). *Second language research: Methodology and design*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Moore, C. (2017). Current trends in English language teaching in Mexico. In P. Grounds & C. Moore (Eds.), *Higher education English language teaching and research in Mexico* (125-157). British Council Mexico.
- Riazi, A. M. (2016). *The Routledge encyclopedia of research methods in applied linguistics*. Routledge.
- Rose, H., McKinley, J., & Baffoe-Djan, J. B. (2020). *Data collection research methods in applied linguistics*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Smith, L. E. (1976). English as an international auxiliary language. *RELC Journal*, 7(2), 38-42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003368827600700205>
- Stern, H. H. (1983). *Fundamental concepts of language teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Subtirelu, N. (2013). What (do) learners want (?): A re-examination of the issue of learner preferences regarding the use of 'native' speaker norms in English language teaching. *Language Awareness*, 22(3), 270-291. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2012.713967>
- Timmis, I. (2002). Native-speaker norms and international English: A classroom view. *ELT Journal*, 56(3), 240-249. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/56.3.240>
- Zheng, Y. (2013). An inquiry into Chinese learners' English-learning motivational self-images: ENL learner or ELF user? *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 2(2), 341-364. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jelf-2013-0018>

